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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001065

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS
USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT REVIEWS OPTIONS AS DEADLINE
DRAWS NEAR

REF: A. COLOMBO 1056

1B. COLOMBO 1052 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

POLITICAL OVERTURES

11. (U) As of COB June 15, Government coalition partner Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was sticking to its ultimatum to President Chandrika Kumaratunga to abandon plans to sign a "joint mechanism" on tsunami aid with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by midnight June 16 or face the dissolution of the alliance (Reftels). After the junior coalition partner spurned a June 13 overture by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse to modify its position (Ref A), two other Cabinet Ministers sent a letter to JVP Secretary Tilvin Silva on June 15 urging the JVP to withdraw its deadline. As of COB June 15, the Embassy had no information that the JVP had replied. (Note: Party propagandists and wordsmiths may have been otherwise occupied with assorted rallies and protests. See paras 2-3 below.)

POLITICAL POSTURING

12. (U) At the JVP's rally in Colombo on June 14 (Ref A), Tilvin Silva assured the party faithful (several thousand of whom converged near the Town Hall) that even if the JVP quit the alliance, the Marxist party would never allow "reactionaries" like the opposition United National Party (UNP) to assume the reins of government. Instead, he pledged the formation of a new alliance of "all the progressive masses"--including possible defectors from the President's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). JVP Propaganda Secretary and MP Wimal Weerawansa blamed "NGO agents" for forcing the joint mechanism on the nation and accused unidentified presidential confidants of plotting a conspiracy to plunge the nation into anarchy. He ended by emphasizing his party's readiness to sacrifice lives (he did not specify whose) to safeguard the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation.

13. (SBU) As promised, the JVP followed up its June 14 rally with a June 15 protest in Colombo by members of the JVP-affiliated government employees union. Assistant Superintendent of Police Champika Siriwardena told us that he estimated 80 percent of government employees in the downtown area participated in the lunch-hour rally, an indication, if true, that anti-mechanism sentiment may be spreading beyond JVP boundaries. While Siriwardena reported that the labor protest was generally peaceful and well organized, he expressed concern at the worsening condition of Ven. Dambila Amila Thero, who began a hunger strike to protest the joint mechanism at the main railway station in downtown Colombo on June 10 (Ref B). Siriwardena reported that when police tried to carry out a court order to remove him to a hospital on June 15, the monk refused to move, and the supporters around him (whom Siriwardena estimated to number about 1,000) objected vehemently. Police were hoping, the police official said, that the JVP would intervene to convince the monk to abandon his fast. (Note: We have not heard that the JVP is contemplating any such move.) Siriwardena said that he feared the situation could quickly turn violent if the monk took a turn for the worse.

POLITICAL PARALYSIS?

14. (C) In addition to (so far fruitless) efforts to win support from opposition parties like the UNP, Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the President is reportedly considering a variety of options available to her, by virtue of her extensive executive powers, to weather the impending political storm. Besides the possibility of proroguing Parliament on June 22 (Ref A), TNA MP Joseph Pararajasingham told us on June 15 that he understands Kumaratunga may also be considering introducing the mechanism as a bill in the next Parliamentary session.

Pararajasingham, who had just returned the previous day from briefing LTTE politicians in Kilinochchi on latest developments in the south, expressed dismay at this prospect--a sentiment he said the LTTE leadership shared. Bringing the bill before Parliament would almost certainly doom its timely passage, he said, especially since any Sri Lankan citizen has the right to challenge the legality of a proposed bill in the Supreme Court. According to Pararajasingham, the LTTE believes that the President cannot withdraw support for the mechanism, especially since the Co-chairs' public statement of June 13 supporting it, but the Tigers "have doubts" that, given the JVP's opposition, the initiative will ever see the light of day. Submitting the bill to Parliament--and thus consigning it to the inevitable long, drawn-out legislative and legal wrangling that would surely accompany it--might be the President's way of punting on the nettlesome issue, he speculated. On possible scenarios should the JVP stick to its deadline and quit the government on June 16, the TNA MP predicted no immediate breakdown. Even in the event of a vote of no confidence, he said, the legislative timeline can be so long--the vote must be entered on the agenda, presented to the party leaders, listed on Parliamentary "order papers," and moved for debate on the floor--that the whole process could be spun out over several months--during which interval Kumaratunga may think of some way of extricating herself from this dilemma.

JVP IN KANDY

15. (SBU) After COB June 15 JVP party leaders were reportedly in Kandy for an anti-mechanism rally and to meet with the Malwatte and Asgiriya "Mahanayakes," or chief Buddhist prelates. There was some speculation (and perhaps some wishful thinking) that the former Marxists might be seeking political cover from the prelates for a possible compromise with the President. One theory held that the Mahanayakes might request the JVP to postpone its June 15 deadline, giving the party a comfortable and culturally palatable way out from the impending showdown, at least for the time being, and some time to reassess the situation.

COMMENT

16. (C) A few weeks ago, there was much speculation among Colombo political observers that the President would sign the joint mechanism on June 15, a date purportedly chosen by astrologers as auspicious. So far, however, the day has proven anything but lucky for the beleaguered Kumaratunga. With the midnight deadline fast approaching, the JVP has given no indication that it intends to back down from its ultimatum to the President. While we do not know the subject of the sudden meeting in Kandy, if the JVP leadership is rethinking next steps, getting the Mahanayakes' blessing on any about-face makes good political sense for a party that has ordained itself the savior of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. Failing an eleventh-hour JVP change-of-heart, however, the likely scenarios the President faces are not pleasant. Without the support of either the JVP or the UNP, the President simply cannot maintain a majority government. The options bruited about over the past few days, e.g., proroguing Parliament, submitting a joint mechanism bill to Parliament, are short-term fixes that will not prevent the meltdown of her majority. Astrologers' predictions notwithstanding, for right now, it is hard to identify any auspicious omens on the immediate political horizon.
ENTWISTLE